

Fort Sam Houston National Historic Landmark  
Gift Chapel (Building #2200)  
San Antonio  
Bexar County  
Texas

HABS No Tx-3303-7

HABS  
Tex  
15-SANIS  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Architectural and Engineering Record  
National Parks Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
FORT SAM HOUSTON NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK

GIFT CHAPEL  
(Building #2200)

HABS No. TX-3303-7

Location: North side of Wilson Street between Hancock Road and  
Connell Road, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas.

Present Owner  
and Occupant: United States Army

Present Use: Chapel

Significance: The "Gift" Chapel was the first permanent religious  
institution built expressly for the servicemen and their  
families at Fort Sam Houston. The property was donated by  
the City of San Antonio and construction funds were  
contributed by both San Antonio Community leaders and  
military personnel; hence the name: "Gift" Chapel.

The Chapel, designed by local architect Leo M. J. Dielmann,  
has distinct Beaux-Arts influences typical of the period.  
It was dedicated in an elaborate ceremony in October, 1909  
by President William Howard Taft, although it had not been  
finished by that time. The chapel has remained in active  
use by military personnel of all denominations since its  
dedication.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of Erection: 1908-1910
2. Architect: Leo M. J. Dielmann, born and raised in San Antonio,  
graduated from St. Mary's College, San Antonio. After  
graduation, he traveled to Germany for his professional  
architectural training, completing a program at the Technische  
Baukunst Schule, Idstein Im Taunus, in 1902. He returned to San  
Antonio to set up his practice that same year and maintained an  
office in San Antonio until 1957. While practicing  
architecture, Dielmann also took an active part in general  
construction, acting for several years as President of Dielmann  
Construction Company, a construction and building supply  
business started by his father. Dielmann designed many public  
buildings, but very few residential structures. He was  
responsible for a number of buildings at Our Lady of the Lake  
College and Incarnate Word College, both in San Antonio. He is  
also credited with numerous churches all over Texas.

3. Original and Subsequent Owners: Initially owned by the parishioners who contributed to its construction, the Chapel was officially turned over to the Quartermaster's Office, Fort Sam Houston, in 1911 and has remained under U.S. Army ownership since that time.
4. Contractor: John C. Dielmann, father of the architect.
5. Original Plan and Construction: The 1907 design of the Post Chapel seems more typical of a Paris-trained architect rather than one who had studied in Germany. Its bulky form, advancing and receding facade, buff colored materials, heavy classical ornament, and shallow, copper-clad dome are typical of the Beaux-Arts style of many civic and/or memorial structures of the period.

In its original form, there was no central doorway. The entrance to the Chapel was gained through the side doors off the front entrance portico.

The building was dedicated, although incomplete, in 1909 after \$43,724.58 had been expended. Finishing details continued during the next six years as funds became available.

6. Alterations and Additions: The exterior of the Chapel has had few changes over the years. The stained-glass windows were installed shortly after 1929, replacing standard double-hung sash windows. A center front door was added sometime after 1929. (A 1928-1929 photo does not show this door). A rear brick addition, c. 1959, houses the heating and air-conditioning system.

Numerous interior changes, for which there is little documentation, have occurred over the years. Extensive interior remodeling reportedly occurred between the years 1929-1931. There is no documentation available on whether the Catholic Chapel was part of the original Chapel plans, or whether it was a 1930s modification. Plans dated 1941 indicate that the office at the north end of the Catholic Chapel had already been added by this time. These plans also show the organ located on the first floor, near the altar, and the choir loft located at the north end of the nave.

In 1955, the Chancel was remodeled. "The altar chancel rail, pulpit and lecturn were finished in fumed oak and all dark woodwork and interior walls painted a light buff color. Behind the altar, a seventeen foot reredos in fumed oak was added" (from "The Gift Chapel", a booklet prepared by Ruth Buerkle, Fort Sam Houston Historical Society). Since this time, a number of offices have been sensitively added to accommodate resident chaplains.

The first organ, installed in the 1930s, was replaced by a custom built organ in 1969. Electronic chimes, made possible by the significant contribution of Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower, were added in 1971. The nave was decorated with flags representing the 50 states and territories that same year. The chancel was extensively remodeled in 1972 to conform to more ecumenical standards. The Jewish worship area in the east wing is said to have been established in the early 1970s. All the stained glass windows were also restored at the time.

B. Historical Context:

The Gift Chapel was designed in 1907 and dedicated in 1909. The land, originally known as Maverick Park, was donated by the City of San Antonio. Chaplain Dickson led the fund-raising campaign. It was lack of funds however, that delayed the Chapel's completion. According to Elizabeth Orchard's research (see Sources of Information), \$10,000 was appropriated from government funds in 1911 to assist in its completion. During this same year, the Chapel was officially turned over to the Quartermaster at Fort Sam Houston. The building was used extensively for the mobilization of 1911 occurring as a result of unrest in Central America. In 1912, \$10,000 and finally in 1915, \$15,000 more was appropriated to complete the Chapel's construction.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: Leo Dielmann's Post Chapel, with its classically ornamented buff tone brick facade and shallow central copper dome draws its stylistic influences from the academic Beaux-Arts tradition. Designed in 1907, it was a common form for civic and memorial structures and displays the local architect's knowledge of and individual interpretation of current architectural trends of the period.

2. Condition of Fabric: The condition of the fabric is good to excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall Dimensions: The Chapel, measuring approximately 112'-7" by 86'-6", extends basically seven bays on the south front facade and six bays along the east and west sides. The structure rests on a raised, dressed limestone basement level. A central domed mass houses the main chapel and balcony level, with flanking one-story side wings, projecting 22'-9" on either side.
2. Foundations: The Chapel rests on concrete and brick with central brick foundation piers visible at the basement level.
3. Wall Construction, Finish and Color: The walls are tan, or buff colored brick in an all-stretcher brick facade, 18" thick -- with five-one-five pattern common bond visible at the balcony level. Prominent brick quoinage decorates the corners.
4. Structural System, framing: Brick load bearing walls form the structural system. The overhead structural support system/floor support visible from the central unfinished space in the basement is gradually slanted toward the chancel in the theater-like fashion.
5. Porches, Stoops, Balconies and Bulkheads: The front entrance portico, set back between projecting bays, is nine steps above ground level. Three stilted round archways with scroll-like keystones are separated by Corinthian pilasters. A wide frieze separates a heavy projecting cornice and cast plaster balustrade with interrupting piers just above. This elaborate classical detailing is painted white.

Through the archways, the interior portico doorways are again detailed with stilted round arches, simpler elongated keystones, and are separated by Ionic pilasters along the north and south walls. The portico ceiling is elaborately decorated with cast-plaster panels defined by a surrounding Rinceau ornament and edged with a denticulated trim. Two suspended hexagonal ceiling lanterns light the entryway.

A heavy solid brick parapet with interrupting piers surrounds the entire roofline.

Basement bulkhead entrances, sheltered by hinged, metal double-door openings are found on the east and west sides, five bays back from the front of the building.

Pouring concrete stairways, rising nine steps above grade, are found on the east and west sides further north from the bulkheads, providing access to the first floor rear offices. A second set of stairs, immediately adjacent, descends below grade to the basement.

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and Doors: Three sets of solid oak double doors, one at the center and one at the east and west end of the front portico, provide entrance to the Chapel. Each door has a single full length rectangular panel with surrounding molding. Side rear doorways have single light transoms with large upper rectangular glass panes over three lower horizontal panels.

Basement doors are solid wood, five-panel doors. Entrance into the rear heating unit is provided by modern metal double doors with upper glass panes.

- b. Windows: Stained glass windows are found on the front and side elevations. Two single-pane arched stained glass windows flank the center entrance in the front portico. These windows are inset with stilted keystoned arch surrounds similar to the portico doorway detail. Narrow rectangular fixed-pane stained glass windows are located in the front bay projections on either side of the front portico. The windows are recessed into long rectangular brick panels running  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the height of the building. Elaborate plaster details rest above these windows within the recessed panel and combine a cartouche-like ornaments, surrounding heavy torus moldings, denticulation and swag details. With their tiered bracket supports, the result is an awkward and heavy design.

Single stained glass windows set in brick panels are found on the east and west side wing facades toward the front of the building. (Note: The front window on the east facade is a single pane rather double hung). Four additional double-hung sash stained glass windows are on either side, grouped in single recessed panels.

All other windows toward the rear of the building are clear, double-hung sash windows.

Just above the one-story wings on the east and west sides, and lighting the interior balcony level, are three fixed semicircular stained-glass windows, broken into four sections by heavy, evenly spaced mullions. Each window bears an insignia of either individual corps or divisions of the U.S. Army.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape and Covering: The roof is dominated by a massive wood frame dome clad in seamed copper sheeting. At the very center is a raised oculus, approximately 12 feet in diameter, apparently used for ventilation. Side flanking wings and front balcony have flat, gravel covered roofs.
- b. Cornice, Eaves: A prominent, simply detailed, cornice circles the entire building just below the solid parapet wall at the roofline. The cornice projects significantly and is supported by closely spaced modillions. There is a simple egg-and-dart molding trim. East and west one-story wings have cornice lines echoing the same detail.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plans:

- a. Basement: The basement, originally unimproved, has been partially finished. The central portion remains unfinished with dirt floor and exposed concrete and brick piers. The finished area surrounds this central space on the south, east and west sides in a U-shape plan.

The west wing of the basement has a kitchen in the northeast corner with a large meeting space ("Fellowship Room") to the south.

The east wing has a small nursery in the northwest corner and office space to the south. A connecting open corridor runs east-west at the south side of the building between the end wings, completing the U-shape plan. A small lavatory is located at the east end of the hallway.

Flights of stairs at each end of the hallway lead to the first floor vestibules.

Three small north end storage rooms (including a wine cellar) are accessible from the rear exterior basement entries.

- b. First Floor: The Chapel has three entrances off the front, south portico; a central double doorway leads directly into the rear of the Chapel while the two end doorways, on the east and west, lead into small side vestibules. Stairways along the south corner wall in each vestibule run from the basement to the balcony.

The north interior vestibule doorways lead into the nave, the east and west vestibule doorways lead into the side one-story flanking wings.

A small Catholic Chapel (Blessed Sacrament Chapel), is located in the west wing, and occupies 3/4 of its length. A later office addition was made at the north end (prior to 1941 plans) of this wing. It has not been determined whether this Chapel, with its elaborately detailed plaster ceiling, was part of the original design.

A Jewish Chapel was established in the east wing in the early 1970s. (Prior use of this space was not indicated in earlier plans and records.) This Chapel is smaller than the Catholic Chapel, due to the chaplains' offices located in both the northeast and southeast corners. This Chapel is also much simpler in detail than the Catholic Chapel. The Ner Tamid (eternal light) hangs at the entrance with other traditional elements of the faith appropriately placed.

The central nave area is approximately 68'-8" by 51'-10", with a prominent domed ceiling. Massive segmental arches on all four sides of the nave and corner pendentives support the center dome. The altar, within a recessed arched chancel, is on the north wall. Smaller rooms (Sacristy/vestry area) are located to the right and left of the altar. Office space accessible from side hallways off the nave and from the sacristy in the main block of the Chapel is currently laid out in a triangular plan in the northeast and northwest corners.



- c. Balcony: Spiral stairs in the south front projecting bays lead up to the balcony. The balcony is open on the south, east and west sides, overlooking the central nave. A closed off storage area (currently housing a portion of the heating system) is located along the north wall between two second-floor offices. The pipe organ is located at the south end and oak pews line the east and west side balconies. The overhanging balcony on the south, east and west sides is supported by modified Corinthian columns at the first floor level.
2. Stairways: Narrow three-run, closed-string stairs run from the basement to the first floor vestibules in the southeast and southwest corners. A more elaborate staircase continues from the first floor up to the balcony. Stairs wind up to the balcony from the first floor level. An outer dark-stained railing with slender turned balustrade and newel post curve up to the balcony level.
3. Flooring: Tile floors in the basement, wall-to-wall carpeting on the first and balcony levels, cover the original wood floor.
4. Wall and Ceiling Finish: All walls are plaster, as is the domed ceiling.

The Blessed Sacrament Chapel, in the west wing has an elaborate cast-plaster ceiling of heavy garlands, bead-and-reel and egg-and-dart moldings with corner cartouche details. This ceiling continues into the adjacent office to the north (a later modification).

5. Doorways and Doors: Interior doors off the front vestibules are swinging solid wood doors with two full length inset vertical panels. Vestibule doors into the nave have fixed stained glass transoms above. Clear sliding doors are used to close off the side Chapels from the nave. All other office doors throughout are five-panel doors with horizontally set panels.
6. Special Decorative Features: A new (1969) pipe organ is located at the south end of the choir loft.

Colorful flags of the fifty states, U.S. Territories, and the major units currently assigned to Fort Sam Houston, hang from the balcony. Over the central arch framing the altar recess (or chancel) hang the U.S. flag, the Texas flag, the U.S. Army flag and one of two existing flags of San Antonio. The flags were added in the early 1970s.

The solid oak pews are original. They were refinished approximately ten years ago.

7. Mechanical Equipment:

- a. Heating: Heat is provided by gas-fired air heating cabinets. An addition to the north rear side of the building in 1959 houses all the building's utilities. Air-conditioning units were installed in 1963.
- b. Lighting: Incandescent and florescent lighting throughout. Chain suspended hexagonal lantern lights with Gothic tracery detail -- a later addition -- are found throughout.
- c. Miscellaneous, Other: An outside speaker system exists with speakers visible at the raised central portion of the copper dome.

D. Site:

- 1. General Setting and Orientation: The Post Chapel is on the north side of Wilson Street, set back from the road with a tree-lined horseshoe driveway in front and a large parking lot to the east. Chapel grounds are nicely landscaped.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Original Architectural Drawings:

An architect's rendering of the Chapel before its construction is framed and hangs in the northeast office of the Chapel.

B. Old Views:

The Fort Sam Houston Museum, Building #123, San Antonio, Texas. The Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT) Library, Vertical Files -- Leo M. J. Dielmann, San Antonio, Texas.

Views of Fort Sam Houston, Record Group 92, F Series, Audio-Visual Archives, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.

C. Interviews:

Dielmann, Leo M. J., Jr. Telephone interview 05/30/80. Son of architect. San Antonio, Texas.

D. Bibliography:

1. Primary and Unpublished Sources:

Real Property Records, Directorate of Facilities Engineering,  
Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas. (1941 plans available)

Buerkle, Ruth C. The Gift Chapel. Unpublished pamphlet copied  
and distributed by the Fort Sam Houston Historical Society, n.d.

Orchard, Elizabeth. The History of the Development of Fort Sam  
Houston. Unpublished master's thesis. University of Texas at  
Austin, 1936. (Held at the San Antonio Conservation Society  
Library).

2. Secondary and Published Sources:

Handy, Mary Olivia. A History of Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio,  
Naylor Inc., 1951.

E. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

Correspondence and other miscellaneous files relating to Fort Sam  
Houston, San Antonio, Texas. National Archives and Records Service,  
Washington, D.C.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The detailed survey of eighteen (18) architecturally representative  
structures, and a group of streetscapes, at Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio,  
Texas, was undertaken in 1980 by the National Architectural and  
Engineering Record (NAER) after a comprehensive inventory of the Post was  
conducted. Funding for the project was made possible through the  
cooperative efforts of the Department of the Army, Fort Sam Houston, and  
the San Antonio Conservation Society.

This project was under the general supervision of Kenneth Anderson, Acting  
Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey of the National  
Architectural and Engineering Record. Sally Tompkins of the NAER staff  
was project supervisor. Project Historian was Kathryn A. Burns, San  
Antonio, Texas. Photographic records were provided by David Kaminsky,  
Roswell, New Mexico.

**FORT SAM HOUSTON, GIFT CHAPEL**

(Fort Sam Houston, Building No. 2200)  
Fort Sam Houston National Historic Landmark  
Wilson St. between Hancock & Connell Sts.  
San Antonio  
Bexar County  
Texas

**HABS No. TX- 3303-7**

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**ADDENDUM TO**

**FORT SAM HOUSTON NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK**

**GIFT CHAPEL**

(Building No. 2200)  
San Antonio  
Bexar County  
Texas

**XEROGRAPHIC COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES**

**HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY**

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